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THE SITUATION OF PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH AROUND NIME, AND TWO METHODOLOGICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVED COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The author offers a pair of proposals for possible practice-led tactics for live electronic music research, both aimed at enhancing musical communication within the sub-discipline and based on activities that the author takes to be informally present in much of the conduct of musicians. By way of background, he first explains why improving musical communication is important in terms of its potential benefit to our disciplinary coherence and our collective ability to communicate fruitfully with each other and with researchers in allied disciplines.

The starting position for this paper is that practice-led research (PLR) approaches have much to offer the fields of interest that come together under New Instruments for Musical Expression (NIME) and to musical scholarship more generally, however, within the sub-discipline a firmer sense of shared purpose and better *musical* communication are needed to help fulfil this potential. Here I suggest that two unremarkable musicianly activities—playing together and sharing music—may be of some use in achieving this, if adopted more wholly into our scholarship.

In a parallel paper [1], I lay out this argument in greater detail. Following Barbara Bolt [2], PLR can be approached as complementary to quantitative, controlled-condition methods and as something whose knowledge claims arise out of being situated at the lived intersection of complex interactions between the ‘music itself’ and society, technology, history and politics [3]. By this account, musical PLR sacrifices some generality of observation in order to contend with musical practice in local, socially entangled, contentious and noisy complexity.

Musical PLR, by this account, should be well placed to make valuable contributions to the wider endeavour of musical research and, in the specific case of live electronic PLR, to the activities around NIME. Furthermore, as musicians are liable to form collaborations that traverse the institutional boundary, PLR should also be able to contribute significantly to knowledge exchange activities. However, this potential does not seem to be being fulfilled.

Even as it is becoming orthodox to argue that musical research is intrinsically interdisciplinary and in need of diverse methods to grasp music’s many aspects properly, the place of PLR within it seems undefined.

Similarly, discussions within NIME have tended to focus on implementation issues—with some coverage of performance—but with very scant coverage of wider issues of practice. This is particularly unfortunate, as the accumulating proceedings of NIME represent the closest we have to a specialist literature on live electronic music that is available. This, I suggest, has a distorting effect on the discourse *within* live electronics PLR: A relative scarcity of wider ranging discussion means that there are few available models for neophyte researchers. Certainly, the preponderance of functional, technological discussion within the field is a documented source of frustration [4].

Finally, whilst musical practice-led researchers may traverse the institutional boundary quite frequently and, indeed, may

regard the locus of their practice as being quite separate from the institutional context of music making, the diversity of experiences and practical approaches that result are not correspondingly represented in our formal discourse where, within electronic music, the cultural priorities of the post-War avant-garde continue to dominate. This arises, in part, because the cultural horizon of much of the canonical literature remains bounded by that tradition. However, it also reflects a collective failure on our part to respond more affirmatively to the dissolution of the last century’s musical hierarchies by developing nimble ways to expand the cultural horizon of the institution and to develop a thoroughgoing pluralist aesthetics of electronic musicking.

Each of these issues can be ameliorated by improving our sense of coherence as a sub-discipline so as to be able to speak with greater certainty and confidence to allied colleagues about what we are able to contribute and how, and to enrich these offerings by making fuller reference to the whole scope of our practical experience. I see developing a greater number of richer and more carefully specified methodologies and improved approaches to communication between practitioner-researchers as a foundational aspect of this project.

Playing Together

A particularly obvious thing that musicians do—and I am surprised how little time is devoted to in institutional contexts—is simply playing together. I am thinking here less of collaboration on particular projects and more of co-practice as an orientation towards communication and exploration, where outcomes in the form of works or public performances are of secondary concern. This is something that takes place informally, but it would merit being considered a more routine and formalised aspect of our scholarly exchange, as a complement to the processes of reflection involved in developing one’s practice. In particular, I see routine co-practice as an opportunity for critical reflection on our ability to play with others by examining, for example:

- the kinds of accommodation (technical and musical) required to provide one another with musical space
- how a mutual sense of musical coherence can be arrived at
- the sorts of practical impediment or serendipity that our choices of materials and instruments gave rise to in a particular context.

There could be various levels of formalism and collectivity. On the one hand, routine and relatively informal engagements could form a standard part of the process of developing new systems and approaches. On the other hand—and more radically—larger-scale co-practice could supplement our other forms of scholarly communication through practice-led symposia where researchers come together to learn about each other’s work through play, rather than through presentations.

Some small steps in this latter direction have already been taken through a series of events that I have been involved in while running with a group of postgraduate and early career researchers from the University of Edinburgh. These have been presented under the banner of the Laboratory for Laptop and Electronic Audio Performance Practice (LLEAPP), and have been held at the Universities of Edinburgh (2009, 2013), Newcastle (2010) and East Anglia (2011). Funding is currently being sought to continue the initiative.

The format of the first three of these events consisted of small groups that formed to devise a performance together over the course of a couple of days; on the fourth we all stayed

in a single group and engaged a musical director to help us devise a performance. This seems to be a promising approach, but still requires a degree of development. We were over-optimistic at first that it would be easy to self-organise and to devise space for regular critical reflection. However, it seems that some degree of workshop-style facilitation is still needed, at least in the early stages, and that a clearer sense of protocol and possible documentary tactics would help participants. A longer and more wide-ranging discussion of how this foundation might be developed further can be found in [5].

Musical Sharing

Musicians routinely share music in order to understand each other's backgrounds and influences, and in order to play better together. Integrating this more formally into the ways that we communicate with each other as researchers and with our audiences could bring a number of benefits.

First, it provides a much-needed pointer for all involved in a musical exchange as to where one is coming from (or aiming for), now that a background in, or allegiance to, Western art music can no longer be taken as read. Second, as a consequence it could serve to lower barriers to participation—as student, scholar, co-player or audience member—by helping to ground work in a tangible cultural-historical context. Third, it could help to progress the overdue work of un-erasing those strands of practice that continue to be unaccounted for in established narratives [6]. Finally, if documented and aggregated, a valuable resource for musical scholars could be built up that demonstrates idiosyncratic traversals of musical-history in relation to particular concrete instances of contemporary musical practice.

Taken together, these could sum to a considerably more potent contribution to the institutional cultural landscape than is currently being made: more inviting and inclusive concerts and departments; richer, deeper and wider teaching; a concretely based pluralist aesthetics of music (electronic or otherwise); an erosion of unilinear approaches to cultural history; and much less haphazard scope for productive exchange with fellow musicians outside institutional contexts.

As with playing together, such exchange can—and most probably ought to—take place at various levels of formality. Practicing musicians and listeners already do this in a number of ways, through playing together, and through the exchange of recommendations, playlists, mix tapes, scores, etc. Meanwhile, Katharine Norman [7] and Kodwo Eshun [8], among others, have offered diverse and idiosyncratic approaches to traversing musical histories through writing.

At one level this could be as simple and lightweight as more routinely augmenting concert programmes—or journal articles and conference presentations—with links to playlists, as a sense-making aid for listeners and readers. Likewise, including shared playlists and such (i.e. the documentation of collaborative projects) not only provides an indicator of the eventual work's cultural place, but social insight into the ways that participants related.

Going a little further, we could consider and exchange tactics for involving students more collaboratively and more formally in coming up with listening material for courses that reflect their tastes and proclivities [9]. In addition to helping engagement, this would form an important forum to develop a wider range of discussing and understanding diverse electronic musics than are currently offered.

More speculatively, we could devote some energy towards thinking what a shareable repertoire of NIME-like music for

playing together would be like. There are considerable compositional challenges here, some of which have already partly broached, particularly through open form works for free instrumentation, but many remain. At any rate, there seems to be no clear reason not to have small, easily graspable and flexible pieces aimed towards a convivial *musica practica*, as well as more technically demanding concert works available.

Endnote

These proposals suffer from running against the grain of current political imperatives of academic research (at least in the U.K.). By being orientated towards communication, not production, their value will not be immediately apparent from the perspective of the institutional prioritisation of research that produces instrumental, tangible and unambiguous outcomes (preferably with clear potential for commodification).

Similarly, these suggestions are both predicated upon a collective understanding of the research endeavour, rather than a competitive one where researchers themselves are commodities. Whilst this orientation is quite conscious, it does leave unanswered the question of what incentive there could be to adopt such practices given the extent to which they may conflict with what some feel to be necessary attention to self-promotion and individual differentiation. I am pessimistic about the effectiveness of a group of competing individuals in challenging the current trend towards ever more hostile and alienating working and learning conditions, and in this sense see some form of collective discourse that can present a coherent and united alternative account of how music could be approached as an urgent matter.

Although my suggestions run against the hegemonic grain, my hope is that they do so in small enough ways, within our margin for manoeuvre, to be practicable and effective in developing the basis for a more cohering and co-hearing discipline in the future.

References and Notes

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